Cambodian Community Portrait

by Miriam Gross

> Human existence is suffering
> The cause of human suffering is desire.
> Where there is no desire, there is no suffering.
> The way to avoid suffering is the middle path.
> Buddha, The Four Noble Truths from
> "Setting in Motion the Wheel of the *Dhamma*"[1]

The Cambodians (or Khmer)* have survived some of the most dramatic personal, social, political, and economic shifts of any group of refugees to come to the United States. Most have moved from peaceful rural villages whose core was the Buddhist monastery, to the killings of the Khmer Rouge, to years of immobility in the Thai border camps, to the postindustrial United States. They have experienced a lifetime of transitions supported only by their reconstituted families and the internal balance that Buddhism provides.

This review will attempt to show how the Buddhist worldview and personal psychology have shaped Khmer identity, experience, problem solving, and social organization and allowed the Khmer to survive the endless transformations of their lives. It will also briefly examine some of the main issues affecting Khmer life in America. Because the majority of the Cambodian refugees who came to the United States were originally from rural communities, this review will only discuss village life, not the middle-class urban experience in Cambodia. In addition, although there is a small but growing number of Christian Cambodian Americans, the number of Christians in Cambodia is very small and their effect on traditional Khmer culture is minimal. For this reason, this review will only address the effects of Buddhism on Khmer culture.

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*Technically, "Khmer" refers only to the majority ethnic group in Cambodia. However, because "Cambodian" and "Khmer" have become interchangeable in English, this review will use both terms to refer to any citizen of Cambodia.

Khmer History

The high point in Khmer history, still remembered as the golden era by many Khmer, was the Angkor period from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries, when the Khmer controlled a region including most of what is now known as Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and parts of Malaysia. During this period, the empire was strongly influenced by Indian Brahmanic, Mahayana, and Theravada Buddhist traditions. In 1431 Siam (modern Thailand) invaded and sacked Angkor, and killed many of the artisans, intellectuals, and elite. Soon after, the Vietnamese destroyed the kingdom and tried to impose their own culture and language.[2] Since then, Cambodia has been in a vulnerable position, pressured by its two stronger neighbors on each side. The Vietnamese in particular have long been viewed as Cambodia's traditional enemy. In 1863, after signing a pact with the Vietnamese who controlled much of Southeast Asia, the French made Cambodia a protectorate.[3] Despite nearly a century of French colonial rule, the Khmer remained more than 80% rural and 95% Buddhist. The French, who concentrated most of their attention in Southeast Asia on Vietnam, ruled Cambodia primarily through Vietnamese administrators and did not create a public school system.[4]

In general, very little of village life was affected by outside influences. Almost all secular education outside the cities continued to be conducted by Buddhist monks who took in boys for a limited period of time and taught them moral values, Buddhist ritual, basic literacy, and manual skills. Boys who were interested could become novices and eventually become ordained as monks. By 1967 there were only 337 doctors trained in Western medicine for a population of 6.25 million.[5] For this reason, almost all medicine was still provided by traditional healers called Kru-Khmer, who were strongly influenced by the Indian Ayurvedic medical tradition.[6] In addition, possession by spirits and other spiritual ills were diagnosed and treated by monks and *aa'cha*, Buddhist laymen who had extensive previous training as monks.[7]

Because the French had limited impact on Khmer society, it primarily retained its original organization. Although Khmer society did not have a caste system, traditionally it had three social ranks: (1) royalty, aristocrats, and high-ranking officials; (2) middle- and lower-ranking government functionaries and wealthy businessmen; and (3) rural peasants and lowest-level urban workers.[8] Rural society was broken down into an additional five ranks.[9] The Khmer language recognizes these differences by having five different registers: one for royalty and government officials, a second for monks, a third for elders, a fourth for equals, and finally, one for subordinates, children, and animals.[10] When dealing with someone who was of a higher social rank, most people acted with great

deference and respect. Frequently networks of patronage developed between higher- and lower-ranking families and individuals. However, most families within the village were considered fairly equal.

Village Life and Community Organization

Traditionally independent and self-sufficient Khmer villages were usually composed of fifteen to twenty-five houses occupied by nuclear families and a Buddhist monastery. Villagers cultivated rice, a type of agriculture demanding a high degree of cooperation between families and communities.[11] The monastery in the village served as both the secular and the religious meeting place, and monks often provided spiritual counseling and social-work-type services for their community as well as religious and moral guidance.[12] The aa'cha often became leaders and advisers since they had the benefits of both the moral and secular education of the monastery that emphasized detached neutrality and personal integrity, and the wisdom of life experience. They also helped with conflict resolution by discussing a situation separately with each person and then telling how to rectify the problem "following Khmer culture thereby achieving harmony and happiness."[13] Although a single leader, advised by the aa'cha and the village teacher, directed each village,[14] decision making was consensual and no individual was ignored or forced to agree with group conclusions.[15] Informal persuasion and negotiation helped people reach consensus. In addition, emotional appeals helped keep those who disagreed involved in the process. However, because both male and female elders were expected to be more knowledgeable, villagers deferred to them.[16]

Most boys spent some time in the monastery, particularly those who lacked discipline or had problems such as too much alcohol consumption. In addition, many boys spent time as monks in order to show gratitude to their parents, especially their mothers. In the monastery, boys learned the self-control that would help them to act as moral guides and leaders in their future families.[17] The belief was that this would lead to happy, harmonious families, which would in turn lead to a larger society with fewer of the conflicts and dissension that made people unhappy.[18] Such a society would be successful both because of the morals of individual people, and because the integrity and foresight of their leader would guide the people in the same direction and lead them in righteous ways.[19]

In general, an individual's status, roles, and identity were determined by gender, age, position in the family, the parents' position within the community, and the family's socioeconomic position or rank in the wider Khmer society.[20] Gender decided not only what role people would play in the

family and community, but also where they would find sources of support and friendship networks. Women were primarily family focused and were always defined by their role as mother or daughter. They cared for their unmarried and married children or their younger brothers and sisters not only during their lives, but even after their death.[21] Before marriage, most men went to live with their fiancée's family for a few years in order to pay off the "bride price." The bride price was the money or labor provided to reimburse the fiancée's family for the loss of her labor. If the woman's family discovered during this probational period that the young man was unacceptable, the marriage ceremony was never held.[22] Divorce was very rare and was never condoned. After the probationary period, most new families tended to settle near the wife's parents, and women gained support and advice from their female relatives. Most men, who were active in greater community decision making, were supported by lifelong friendships often made in their teens.[23]

Although each gender had different roles and responsibilities to play, the primary determinant of rank and status in Khmer society was not gender, but age.[24] An older person would always care for a younger one, even if there were only a few months' difference between them. The oldest child, male or female, became both the nurturer and the leader of his or her siblings.[25] The older person was expected to provide material help, advice, and nurturing. The younger person would offer loyalty, honor, and respect, and would listen to the good advice provided. The larger the age differential, the greater the mutual obligation.[26] Obligation and duty were implicit to the system and were never institutionalized into a hierarchical structure.[27] All individuals had a prescribed age- and gender-based role to play that provided them with their rank and status in the family and community and with their self-identity.[28] Other family and village members tended to relate to individuals based on roles they played such as mother or monk, rather than on their unique personal characteristics and talents.[29] Because behaviors associated with roles were clearly defined, if people didn't follow their expected roles, then others would be unsure of how to react and often retreat from a situation.[30] For example, a respectful young man was not in a position to give advice to an elder. He could not informally take on such a responsibility until he gained the formal status of an elder himself.[31] Thus an individual's roles and the status embedded within them simultaneously shaped both other people's interactions with the individual and their own perceptions of themselves.

Education

Like the monasteries, schools tried to teach children cooperative skills, as well as reading and

writing.[32] It was felt that equality between people in a social situation was more important than getting ahead, because inequality could lead to jealousy and disharmony. In fact, competitive behavior was often viewed as antisocial. For this reason, Khmer teachers tended to praise the accomplishments of a whole class, rather than those of an individual.[33] At the same time that schools tried to instill ethics, they also reinforced the obedience and discipline a child learned at home. Whether they were monks in the temple or educators in the slowly forming secular school system, teachers were treated like parents; they expected and automatic obedience. Teachers and parents mutually supported each other's rules. Children "belonged" to teachers, just as they did to parents.[34] Children and parents tended not to question teachers because that would be disrespectful of their authority. By learning such respectful, disciplined, and cooperative behavior, children tended to fit seamlessly into close-knit family and village life.

Personal Happiness and Well-being

The Khmer believed that personal happiness should be every individual's main goal in life. At the same time, happiness was dependent on the individual assuming a set of behaviors that cooperatively supported the family and the village. According to Buddhist philosophy, individuals were born in a karmic cycle of rebirth. For this reason, death was as important as life for many Buddhists. Respect for both the living and the dead was what made a person civilized.[35] Merit or demerit from previous lives determined an individual's suffering in this life. The only thing that balanced bad deeds were good deeds done both for oneself and for others, particularly those who had already died. Bad actions in this or previous lives could not be forgiven, and suffering was not a payment for them. Instead, it was believed, most suffering was caused by desire and attachment to greed, hatred or anger, ignorance, and the illusion that we are independent beings.[36] Suffering existed to give individuals a chance to learn from previous mistakes. If they didn't, their next life would be just as difficult as this one.[37] Because errors of judgment and action would have repercussions for many lifetimes, the aggressive pursuit of self-discipline for oneself and in one's children was an essential goal.[38] A mature and happy individual, on the other hand, was someone who was selfless, helped others, was quietly cooperative and noncompetitive, didn't challenge authority,[39] was self-contained and modest, and had an extraordinary degree of disciplined self-control.[40] Those who were unable to control their stronger emotions recovered their inner serenity by going back to the monastery in order to meditate and gain distance from their problems.[41]

Being argumentative, having an aggressive speech style, and challenging authority not only could make one unhappy, but could also lead to self-delusion and disharmony in the family and the village. Because all individuals have their own personal beliefs and must make choices for themselves, it was self-deceptive to think one could change their minds.[42] Further, trying to persuade people to agree with one's own ideas was disrespectful because it implied that their convictions were less important than one's own. Argumentative and uncooperative behavior not only hurt others, it also disrupted family and village harmony. Group harmony was often thought to be more important than individual conviction.[43] Further, egotistic pursuit of unreachable desires caused dissension within the family. Such disharmony and selfish behavior not only looked bad to the community and could destroy family welfare, but it also could cause an individual unhappiness in this life and in the next. Not surprisingly, the first-person pronoun in Khmer originally meant "servant." In a sense, service to the needs of others was embedded in the language.[44]

After World War II

After World War II King Norodom Sihanouk won Cambodia's independence from the French and attempted to maintain neutrality between the communist and noncommunist forces surrounding him. He was unable to prevent the Vietnamese communists from establishing bases in Cambodia, and the United States from bombing them in 1968. All of Cambodia became embroiled first in the extension of the Vietnam War into Cambodia, and then in a civil war with the Khmer Rouge (Cambodian communists) fighting the noncommunist Cambodian government. By April 17, 1975, however, the Khmer Rouge succeeded in simultaneously taking over Phnom Penh and then the government. At first the people living in the city were delighted, thinking that the long war was at an end. Soon, however, many of the soldiers, who were often teenagers, began looting houses in some areas and chasing people out of the city, eventually completing a systematic evacuation of Phnom Penh.[45]

For the next four years the Khmer Rouge conducted a reign of terror in which they attempted to reeducate Cambodians and instill in them new cultural patterns and ideology. They started by torturing and killing most teachers, monks, artists, intellectuals, and members of the old governing elite. As for the common people, in addition to forcing loyalty to the Khmer Rouge, the Khmer Rouge tried to break up traditional family structure by sending children as young as six away to labor and reeducation camps. Sleep was limited to at most six hours a night. Food was a watery porridge

composed of much less than one cup of rice a day, and people were forbidden to grow food to supplement this meager portion. Western medicine was not allowed. All families were split up into different camps and were forbidden to help siblings, parents, or grandparents.[46] Trust in family and community members started to disintegrate. As one informal leader remarked:

> Usually between wife, husband–we rarely talk to each other. Because usually at night time the investigator would come and try to listen to what you say in the family whether you try to go against the party . . . So . . . you just stay quiet or sleep until the next morning you go to the fields and work. Just like that night and day. . . . Because if you say something wrong that person is going to tell other people so that the leader will come take you away and kill you. So people cannot speak to each other, cannot hug each other, tell each other how they feel. They just keep to themselves.[47]

In addition to the fight for survival, most people spent the reign of the Khmer Rouge desperately but secretly searching for lost family members. Out of an original population of 7 million Khmer, an estimated 2 million people (or 29%) had died of malnutrition and starvation, unchecked disease, murder, and mines by the end of the Khmer Rouge era.[48] Moreover, the traditional practice of cremating the dead was forbidden, causing many people to feel that the unhappy spirits of their relatives were stuck in this world, haunting them, unable to be reincarnated into a new life.[49]

Thai Border Camps

In 1979 Cambodia's traditional enemy, the Vietnamese, and Cambodian Khmer Rouge defectors overthrew the Khmer Rouge. Around 100,000 Cambodian villagers used the ensuing chaos to make a break through the jungle, land mines, and marauding soldiers for the Thai border where refugee camps were located. The severe famine of 1979–80 caused an additional 500,000 refugees to flee to the Thai border.[50] Many remember seeing the bloated bodies of the dead as they trudged by.[51] Border camps were run or monitored by either the United Nations or whoever's faction was strongest. In the early period, 1980–83, the United Nations' camps helped revitalize many of the refugees. Although food was limited and conditions were dangerous and difficult, people reestablished monasteries, schools, and traditional medical centers, and formed musician, dance, and sports groups.[52] Camps also arranged formal or informal governing structures that help refugees

negotiate the international bureaucracy and politics of resettlement.

By 1983 both newly arrived refugees and long-term camp residents who had not yet been resettled began to feel desperate. Fighting had started again in Cambodia and camp conditions were terrible: food supplies were meager and camp administrators were untrained Thai soldiers.[53] Most important, resettlement policy, prompted by regional political dynamics, had changed, making eligibility for resettlement more stringent and making it very difficult to be recategorized from a "displaced person" to a "refugee." Displaced persons had no legal international protection, which was a disaster for many fleeing Cambodians. After 1984 newly arrived refugees were no longer allowed into UN-run camps, so they stopped at the border and tried to buy their way in.[54] Even when refugees were able to create the cultural and organizational structures that gave shape to their lives, they still felt hopeless, helpless, and completely dependent on unknown people to determine their future.[55] People in the camps were often unable to leave and faced years of hardship stuck inside them. As of 1990 there were still 300,000 people living in Thai camps. After 1993 the United Nations encouraged people to return home even though some of Cambodia was still controlled by the Khmer Rouge and covered with land mines. Those who managed to come to the United States as refugees are constantly aware of the plight of those left behind.[56]

Endnotes

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4. Usha Welaratna, *Beyond the Killing Fields: Voices of Nine Cambodian Survivors in America*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993, p. 15.

5. Frederick P. Munson, *Area Handbook for Cambodia*. Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1968, pp. 69–86, as quoted in Janey Egawa and Nathaniel Tashima, *Indigenous Healers in Southeast Asian Refugee Communities*. San Francisco: Pacific Asian Mental Health Research Project, 1982, p. 34.

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10. *Welaratna, Beyond the Killing Fields: Voices of Nine Cambodian Survivors in America,* p. 32.

11. *Welaratna, Beyond the Killing Fields: Voices of Nine Cambodian Survivors in America,* pp. 265–266.

12. Mitchell G. Zadrozny, ed., *Area Handbook on Cambodia.* New Haven, Conn.: Human Relations Area Files, 1955, p. 131, as quoted in Egawa and Tashima, *Indigenous Healers in Southeast Asian Refugee Communities*, p. 33, and Katherine Kam, "A False and Shattered Peace," *California Tomorrow* 4 (2–3), spring 1989, p. 19.

13. Duncan, *Cambodian Refugee Use of Indigenous and Western Healers to Prevent or Alleviate Mental Illness,* p. 170.

14. *Wildflowers Institute Cambodian Facilitator Focus Group, 11/11/99.*

15. Duncan, *Cambodian Refugee Use of Indigenous and Western Healers to Prevent or Alleviate Mental Illness,* p. 129.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Smith-Hefner, *Khmer American: Identity and Moral Education in a Diasporic Community,* p. 49.

18. *Wildflowers Institute Cambodian Informal Leaders Focus Group I, 10/14/99.*

19. H. Saddhatissa, *Buddhist Ethics: The Path to Nirvana.* London: Wisdom Publications, 1970/1987, pp. 126, 135, as quoted in Ratliff, *Caring for Cambodian Americans: A Multidisciplinary Resource for the Helping Professions*, p. 91.

20. *Wildflowers Institute Cambodian Women's Focus Group, 11/12/99.*

21. Welaratna, *Beyond the Killing Fields: Voices of Nine Cambodian Survivors in America,* p. 268.

22. *Wildflowers Institute Cambodian Informal Leaders Focus Group II, 1/30/00.*

23. Duncan, *Cambodian Refugee Use of Indigenous and Western Healers to Prevent or Alleviate Mental Illness,* pp. 112–113.

24. Hopkins, *Braving a New World: Cambodian Refugees in an American City*, p. 73.

25. *Wildflowers Institute Cambodian Informal Leaders Focus Group I, 10/14/99.*

26. Duncan, *Cambodian Refugee Use of Indigenous and Western Healers to Prevent or Alleviate Mental Illness,* pp. 113–114.

27. Welaratna, *Beyond the Killing Fields: Voices of Nine Cambodian Survivors in America,* p. 270.

28. David J. Steinberg, *Cambodia: Its People, Its Society, Its Culture.* New Haven, Conn.: Human Relations Area Files, 1959, p. 274, as quoted in Welaratna, *Beyond the Killing*

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30. *Ibid.*

31. Steinberg, *Cambodia: Its People, Its Society, Its Culture*, p. 274, as quoted in Welaratna, *Beyond the Killing Fields: Voices of Nine Cambodian Survivors in America*, pp. 264–265.

32. Welaratna, *Beyond the Killing Fields: Voices of Nine Cambodian Survivors in America*, pp. 263–265.

33. Hopkins, *Braving a New World: Cambodian Refugees in an American City*, p. 130.

34. Welaratna, *Beyond the Killing Fields: Voices of Nine Cambodian Survivors in America*, pp. 263–265.

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36. Ratliff, *Caring for Cambodian Americans: A Multidisciplinary Resource for the Helping Professions*, p. 35.

37. Male interview subject, age 46, as quoted in Smith-Hefner, *Khmer American: Identity and Moral Education in a Diasporic Community*, pp. 35–36.

38. *Wildflowers Institute Cambodian Informal Leaders Focus Group I and Elders Focus Group, 10/14/99.*

39. Hopkins, *Braving a New World: Cambodian Refugees in an American City*, p. 130.

40. Smith-Hefner, *Khmer American: Identity and Moral Education in a Diasporic Community*, p. 198.

41. *Wildflowers Institute Cambodian Informal Leaders Focus Group II, 1/39/00.*

42. Welaratna, *Beyond the Killing Fields: Voices of Nine Cambodian Survivors in America*, p. 265.

43. Ratliff, *Caring for Cambodian Americans: A Multidisciplinary Resource for the Helping Professions*, p. 100.

44. Ratliff, *Caring for Cambodian Americans: A Multidisciplinary Resource for the Helping Professions,* p. 99.

45. Hopkins, *Braving a New World: Cambodian Refugees in an American City,* p. 11

46. Hopkins, *Braving a New World: Cambodian Refugees in an American City,* p. 12.

47. *Wildflowers Institute, interview with Cambodian Informal Leader, 11/14/99.*

48. Welaratna, *Beyond the Killing Fields: Voices of Nine Cambodian Survivors in America,* p. xix.

49. Welaratna, *Beyond the Killing Fields: Voices of Nine Cambodian Survivors in America,* pp. 251–253.

50. Welaratna, *Beyond the Killing Fields: Voices of Nine Cambodian Survivors in America,* p. 166.

51. *Wildflowers Institute Cambodian Informal Leaders Focus Group II, 1/39/00.*

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53. *Ibid.*

54. Duncan, *Cambodian Refugee Use of Indigenous and Western Healers to Prevent or Alleviate Mental Illness,* p. 64.

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